

19th-Century Life on the Rails: A Microcosm of American Society

“There is a great deal of jolting, a great deal of noise, a great deal of wall, not much window, a locomotive engine, a shriek, and a bell. The cars are like shabby omnibuses, but larger: holding thirty, forty, fifty, people. The seats, instead of stretching from end to end, are placed crosswise. Each seat holds two persons. There is a long row of them on each side of the caravan, a narrow passage up the middle, and a door at both ends. In the centre of the carriage there is usually a stove, fed with charcoal or anthracite coal; which is for the most part red-hot. It is insufferably close; and you see the hot air fluttering between yourself and any other object you may happen to look at, like the ghost of smoke.”

Charles Dickens, *American Notes For General Circulation*.
Philadelphia, 1842.

Charles Dickens’ description of his experience on the American rails in the 1840s reveals the inadequacies and discomforts of an industry in its infancy. As railroads continued to stretch their tentacles of tracks across the American landscape they became the dominant carrier of people in addition to goods. Bumpy roadbed, inadequate braking systems, or a lack of climate control inside cars had little impact on the movement of freight, but the growth of passenger service required companies to turn their attention towards improving safety and comfort on the rails. Improvements such as more effective braking systems, uniform construction of roadbed, sturdy passenger cars, and the standardization of time allowed for the development of an organized, safe, and effective system of service to emerge.

The railroad quickly became a vital part of American life and everyone from immigrant travelers to wealthy women on holiday depended upon its service. The fact that the railroads were accessible to so many different groups of people with varying needs, expectations, and customs created new safety and comfort issues for railroad companies to address. The intimate contact of diverse groups sharing close personal space for extended periods of time amplified perceived differences and challenged Victorian ideals of proper conduct and social order. As reflected in many mid-19th-century travel narratives, railroads created an unsafe and uncomfortable experience due to the seemingly uncivilized social environment they fostered. In an attempt to strike a balance between its own business needs and the diverse needs and expectations of its customers, the railroad industry reorganized the public space on the rails. The evolution of 19th-century railroad passenger cars, from the design and decor to their physical arrangement on a train line, reflected prevailing notions of luxury, comfort, consumption, and social

order. The ultimate goal of the railroad industry was to attract as many passengers as possible without alienating or offending any others.

The single-class car structure quickly broke down by the 1840s as railroads offered distinct car accommodations that separated passengers based on economic and, oftentimes, social status. A first-class fare not only bought better quality accommodations, but bought a certain level of security and respectability for the passenger who could afford it. Since the higher fare was cost prohibitive to the average traveler, first-class passengers felt as though there was a clearer social and economic distinction between their car and the rest of the train. Companies outfitted first-class cars in such a way as to provide an elegant experience that appealed to Victorian notions of luxury and comfort. First-class cars generally came equipped with ornate decor of upholstered chairs, curtains, and carpeted interior. By the 1870s and '80s railroads incorporated the Pullman Palace cars, sleeper, and dining cars into the first-class travel experience and equipped cars with porters and waiters to cater to the growing needs of these passengers. In essence, the first-class accommodations became more and more like a "home away from home," where passengers could experience a level of luxury that mimicked and even sometimes exceeded what they experienced in their private lives. These accommodations stood in stark contrast to those provided for the regular rail traveler. Perhaps one of the most important distinctions of first-class travel was the special accommodations afforded to the female traveler. The virtue and respectability of the wealthy female passenger who traveled alone were preserved in the inner sanctuary of a first-class ladies' car. Only men who accompanied a woman were admitted to this car and thus women were guarded from the crude language and behavior of the less genteel male passengers.

Second-class accommodations were far more economical and focused less on aesthetic details. Generally these cars consisted of wooden seats with reclining backs and minimal furnishings. A wider range of travelers rode in the second-class car since passengers who could not afford first-class tickets, who were not traveling great distances, who had no need for additional services, or who did not seem fit to travel in the first-class cars used this service. A third-class car did exist on some railroad lines, although it wasn't commonly referred to as third class; this was referred to as the emigrant car. These accommodations were quite basic and less comfortable than the second-class car because they consisted of wooden bench seating and no homey touches. The Pennsylvania Railroad, one of the major carriers of westward traffic, had designated emigrant cars as early as the 1850s to transport passengers from New York to the interior of Pennsylvania or points further west. Newly arriving immigrants were transported by boat to Jersey City, New Jersey, where they boarded Pennsylvania Railroad trains to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Ohio, and Chicago. By 1871, the Pennsylvania Railroad had 161 cars in service, 39 of which were emigrant cars. On lines that offered second-class coaches, not all immigrant travelers were restricted to the emigrant cars. Depending on the line and the level of immigrant traffic, emigrant cars might be hitched to regular trains or in some cases entire trains were devoted solely to emigrant travel.

Emigrant cars differed on each line and ranged from boxcars that had been transformed into passenger cars with the most basic accoutrements to outdated passenger cars that no longer seemed suitable for first-class travel. A notable emigrant car conversion was Lincoln's funeral car, which was stripped and later converted into an emigrant car on the Union Pacific rail line. Some lines used combination cars that transported people west and returned with freight to the east. One thing was common on most lines; many of the emigrant cars were not conducive to long-distance or overnight travel. By the 1880s the emigrant passenger cars of the western lines underwent a slight transformation to help alleviate some of the discomforts of immigrant travel. The tourist car, an emigrant sleeper car, had a common cooking stove as well as a toilet and bench seating. Passengers were expected to provide their own bedding.

The distinction in the decor of the immigrant passenger car as compared to a first-class car can be understood in terms of what a passenger could afford to pay. A more luxurious experience came at a higher price. However, attitudes towards immigrant passengers and their appreciation of the luxuries of travel also governed the physical space on the rails. Whereas emigrant-car space was defined by utility and function, the first-class cars were designed to create a protective and secure travel experience. They mimicked elements of the home to create a comfortable and familiar experience for the wealthy traveler. This same concept did not apply to emigrant travelers. Social distinctions and expectations carried over onto the rails so that a passenger's car accommodations reflected class and social status. Immigrant travelers moving west were perceived as individuals who were neither accustomed to this level of comfort nor worthy of the respectability that middle- and upper-class Americans came to expect and safeguard for themselves. This is particularly evident with the absence of a ladies' car in the second-class accommodations or emigrant cars. The Pennsylvania Railroad's emigrant cars housed a mix of male and female, accompanied and unaccompanied. Also, these western settlers were thought to be rugged or hardy and therefore in no need of the indulgences of upholstered passenger cars adorned with velvet curtains. In the case of the Westchester and Philadelphia Railroad Company, immigrant groups transported from the wharfs to railroad depots were purposely placed in segregated cars because they were thought to be infested with disease and vermin. Even if a passenger could pay for a better ticket, the conductors of the Westchester and Philadelphia line could use their judgment to deny a person travel if he or she was thought to be offensive to the other passengers.

The railroads had been able, for the most part, to separate emigrant passengers from the first-class accommodations through the ticket fare or by restricting immigrants to the purchase of emigrant-car tickets only. One group of travelers tested the social structure of the railroad system because they were not necessarily relegated to second-class accommodations by virtue of their economic status. Black female travelers could afford and did purchase first-class tickets to the ladies' car. Numerous court cases involving black women who were denied entrance into first-class cars reflect the tension on the rails over black women sharing the same space and indulgences of white, wealthy women. Railroads justified their resistance to allowing black and white women to share that space on the rails

arguing that this would create an uncomfortable environment. The railroads offered no separate first-class accommodations to black women, essentially denying them the recognition of their status as a “ladies” and the respectability and protections that came with that status. Instead, black women were seated in second-class cars, and more specifically, the smoking cars that were inhabited mostly by male passengers. Some black women legally challenged their expulsion from the ladies’ car and refused to ride in the smoking car due to the unsafe and offensive nature of those cars.

In addition to the physical space within a car, the location of a passenger car on a train became synonymous with social status. Railroad companies considered the risks involved in railroad travel—the threat of explosions, sparks from the engine, air quality, the risk of derailment—and situated the cars accordingly. The placement of cars on a train offered different levels of comfort and security during travel. Cars closest to the engine were at a greater risk of fire, smoke, and derailment than those located at the rear of the train. Generally, baggage, mail, and emigrant cars were placed at the front of the train and therefore were called head-end cars. Head-end cars created a safety buffer for the rear cars. First class, dining, and sleeper cars were generally located at the rear of the train. Even as these risks decreased with technological improvements, the arrangement of the cars did not change. Customers had become accustomed to this arrangement that demonstrated social and economic position.

Railroad class and car accommodations differed from one line to another and from one region to another according to passenger needs, economic status of the rail travelers, distance traveled, and local or regional conventions. However, railroads created a new public space that took on the qualities and characteristics of American society and also helped establish and shape public ideals of luxury, comfort, and gentility. The fear and discomfort brought on by a new public space that allowed for the mixing and melding of morals and values shaped the way in which passengers of different genders, classes, and ethnicities experienced the rails. The role of 19th-century railroads as an extension of the private lives of their passengers and as a public demonstration of social order is evident in the evolution of passenger car accommodations.

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